DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 681 HE 034 232

AUTHOR Schlosser, Lewis Z.; Sedlacek, William E.
TITLE Religious Holidays on Campus: Policies, Problems, and Recommendations. Research Report.
INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Counseling Center.
REPORT NO RR-02-01
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; *Diversity (Student); Educational Environment; *Educational Policy; Higher Education; *Religious Holidays
IDENTIFIERS University of Maryland College Park

ABSTRACT

An increase in the diversity of students' religious affiliations has necessitated that students affairs professionals address the role of religion in students' lives. This paper is an examination of the current policies at the University of Maryland concerning the observance of religious holidays, accompanied by a critique of those policies. Recommendations are provided for ways that faculty and staff can be more sensitive to the needs of students from minority religious groups and for policies concerning religious holidays that are more inclusive of all religious diversity. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 456 681

COUNSELING CENTER

Office of Vice President for Student Affairs

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

College Park, Maryland

Religious Holidays on Campus:

Policies, Problems, and Recommendations

Lewis Z. Schlosser and William E. Sedlacek

Research Report # 02-01

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

W.E. Sedlacek

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

HE034232

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Counseling Center
Shoemaker Building
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742

Religious Holidays on Campus:

Policies, Problems, and Recommendations

Lewis Z. Schlosser and William E. Sedlacek

Research Report # 02-01

Counseling Center
Shoemaker Building
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742

Religious Holidays on Campus:

Policies, Problems, and Recommendations

Lewis Z. Schlosser and William E. Sedlacek

Research Report # 02-01

Summary

An increase in the diversity of students' religious affiliations has necessitated that student affairs professionals address the role of religion in students' lives. An examination of the current policies here at the University of Maryland concerning the observance of religious holidays is presented, accompanied by a critique of those policies. Recommendations are provided for ways that (a) faculty and staff can be more sensitive to the needs of students from minority religious groups and (b) policies concerning religious holiday observance can be more inclusive of all religious diversity.

Religious holidays on campus: Policies, problems, and recommendations

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in the diversity of the religious affiliations of students in higher education (Snyder & Sedlacek, 2001; Suthakaran & Sedlacek, 1999). While students still report Christianity most frequently as their religion, there are increasing numbers of students from religious minorities attending colleges and universities. For example, results from the annual student census at our home institution (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 1999) revealed that nearly 20% of incoming students identified as a religious minority (i.e., Buddhist, Hindu, Islam, or Jewish). Because of this diversity of religious affiliations represented, institutions of higher education must be sensitive to the issues and needs related to religion of all their students (Temkin & Evans, 1998).

With regard to religious diversity, one issue that stands out is the academic calendar. Most academic calendars are designed around the winter and summer breaks. It is no coincidence, however, that winter break would be scheduled around Christmas, given that the majority of students report being Christian (Schlosser & Sedlacek, 1999; Snyder & Sedlacek, 2001; Suthakaran & Sedlacek, 1999) and the cultural atmosphere of most academic institutions (and the United States) is Christian (Ribak-Rosenthal & Kane, 1999; Schlosser, 2001). In addition, the spring break of many schools coincides with Easter. Given the current cultural climate, there may be an assumption among educators that Christmas is a universal holiday; "teachers…may believe that everyone, regardless of religious background, celebrates Christmas at least [in] a secular way (Gelb, 1987, p.11)." This false assumption is likely to occur not only in academia, but also in the workplace, retail, and business environments, where Christmas is seen as a secular, "American" holiday.

These faulty assumptions are potentially harmful, as they may foster religious ethnocentrism and insensitivity in Christian students through the imposition of their tradition on students of all religious backgrounds (Gelb, 1987; Schlosser, 2001). An examination of the holidays for minority religious groups reveals that these holidays are often defined by how they relate to Christian holidays (Ribak-Rosenthal & Kane, 1999). Furthermore, which holidays for minority religious groups that receive attention is typically a result of temporal proximity to a Christian holiday, as opposed to actual significance as decided by the religious group itself. For example, a common assumption is that Chanukah is a very important Jewish holiday of the year simply because it typically occurs around Christmas. This assumption propagates "the false notion that Chanukah is the 'Jewish Christmas' (Gelb, 1987, p.12)."

Given the close proximity of Christmas to New Year's Day, it could be argued that the winter academic break is structured around the New Year. This argument, however, is only viable in a Christian-dominated society. Imagine for a moment that Judaism was the dominant religion in the United States, and that Jews had the accompanying power that goes along with being dominant. Classes would start sometime in September or October, after the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah (which incidentally would be considered New Year's Day) and Yom Kippur, but the starting date would vary from year to year because the Jewish calendar is lunar-based. Classes would go straight through December (with no break for Christmas) and finish up some time in January. Christian students would have to juggle their religious and scholastic lives, something religious minority students have dealt with during their entire academic careers.

Although the Judaism was used in the above example to make the point, similar examples could be constructed from Buddhism, Hinduism, and/or Islamic perspectives, among others. It is hoped that this example illustrates how religious minorities have to expend significant amounts

of energy to practice their faith and maintain their academic pursuits. When compared to Christian students who enjoy many privileges (Schlosser, 2001), students from minority religious groups must work much harder to survive and thrive in a system that is designed specifically for the needs of Christian students. For example, while Christian students can be with family and celebrate traditions during Christmas without scholastic pressures (e.g., homework, exams), students from minority religious groups often celebrate holidays in their faith while concurrently dealing with the pressures of their academic program. Anytime a policy or practice favors one group over any other(s), that is the essence of discrimination (Sedlacek, 1996). This kind of subtle, yet consistent oppression is exemplified by the policies concerning religious holiday observance at our home institution (and probably many others like it).

Policies and Problems

Many college campuses currently have established policies concerning the observance of religious holidays and the potential implications for not attending class on those holidays. There are varying degrees of acceptance, but most will allow a student to miss classes for religious purposes. At our home university, the policy about missing classes for religious reasons attempts to address the needs of all students. Unfortunately, there are three major problems (i.e., written documentation, knowledge of holidays, power) with this policy that clearly disadvantage students from minority religious groups. Each of the flaws will be amplified below.

Written documentation. The policy dictates that the student must apply in writing and provide written documentation to support their claim that their absence was due to religious holiday observance. What this implies is that a student must obtain a note from her/his spiritual leader (e.g., Guru, Priest, Rabbi) in order for the absence to be excused for religious reasons. Aside from being distrusting of, and intrusive to, students, this policy does not convey the idea

that the university respects and values religious diversity. Christian students are not required to provide a note from their spiritual leader as to why they were not in class on significant religious holidays, mostly because all of the important Christian holidays are taken into account by the academic holiday calendar. Never having to deal with these issues is a prime example of privilege enjoyed by Christian students (Schlosser, 2001). Finally, this policy also does not account for the ethnic/cultural identity of religious minorities that is not "religious" (e.g., students may observe a holiday where they do not visit their spiritual leader).

Knowledge of Holidays. The policy statement clearly indicates that the winter break "coincides with certain religious observances, e.g., Christmas and Kwanzaa." However, while the policy actually mentions several other holidays by name (i.e., Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, and Good Friday), it still is significantly lacking for non-Christian students. In this particular case, the needs of one religious minority group (i.e., Jewish students) have been partially accounted for (i.e., because while classes are still held, tests and exams can not be given on the above-mentioned holidays). However, this list is extremely brief and narrow in its focus, totally excluding the needs of Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim students, among others.

The rationale for this exclusion, according to the policy, is that the "volume of students attending other observances has not warranted additions and changes to this official list." Thus, the campus administration believes that not enough religious minorities are on campus to justify educating people about the significant religious holidays in those faiths. Again, Christian privilege appears to be at work. While people in the United States are knowledgeable about Christian holidays whether they are Christian or not (Ribak-Rosenthal & Kane, 1999; Schlosser, 2001), most people do not know about many of the holidays celebrated by people from non-Christian religions. For this reason, students from minority religious groups are likely to feel

more pressure than their Christian counterparts because they have to explain to their teachers (1) what are their religious holidays and (2) why they need to be absent on these holidays. In deciding not to publish a list of all religious holidays (i.e., including more non-Christian ones), the writers of the policy are sending a subtle, yet powerful ethnocentric message concerning what holidays are important enough for people to know about and which ones are not.

Power. The policy statement by our campus administration fails to account for issues of power. Sedlacek (1996) has noted that power is a necessary element for the existence of institutionalized discrimination. Specifically, as it is written, the university policy places the onus of responsibility on the student in terms of missing classes for religious holidays (i.e., the student must inform the instructor of all intended absences within the first 2 weeks of class). This fails to account for the power imbalance inherent in the teacher-student relationship. Because teachers are in a 'one-up' position, students might be cautious approaching them about missing class (e.g., teachers have the power to determine students' grades). Therefore, students might be reluctant to ask for too many accommodations because they may fear that the professor will see them in a negative light and/or as a "problem" student.

Summary. Each of the above-mentioned problems highlights a different aspect of the policies that appear biased toward Christian students. Dealing with issues related to religious holiday observances, something Christian students often never have to address, is likely to contribute to students from minority religious groups feeling a greater amount of pressure than their Christian counterparts as they juggle their personal and academic commitments. The remainder of this paper is structured around specific recommendations for developing policies and procedures that truly appreciate all religious diversity.

Recommendations

Recently, we presented these issues at a student affairs conference to try and generate some recommendations about how to improve the policies at institutions of higher education to be more inclusive of religious diversity (Schlosser, Holmes, Ulmer, and Sedlacek, 2001). We were pleased with the wide range of attendees; the Vice President for Student Affairs as well as professionals from a number of student personnel areas attended the session. As a result of that presentation, several recommendations were identified that can be made concerning the policies and practices around religious holiday observance. Each recommendation is described below.

Religious holiday calendar. The first recommendation is that the campus administration distributes a calendar annually that identifies all of the religious holidays for as many religious groups as possible. This calendar should be distributed to everyone on campus (i.e., all faculty, staff, and students) and should be available all over campus (e.g., residence halls, student union, etc.). In addition, a letter should be included to faculty and staff, letting them know that they are responsible for being aware and knowledgeable about these holidays. This letter should alleviate some of the pressure from the students, who historically have been responsible for educating faculty and staff about their religious holidays and the reasons for which they must be absent.

During our presentation, the issue of which holidays to include was raised. Our view is that this holiday calendar should be over-inclusive so that there are not any religious groups on campus that feel marginalized. Furthermore, being over-inclusive should greatly decrease the likelihood of getting trapped in a discussion of who is the most oppressed religious group and how many holidays should be allotted to each religious group. In sum, disseminating information about religious holidays in a non-threatening manner (i.e., a calendar) appears to provide a good medium for communicating necessary information.

Education and training. The second recommendation was also focused on increasing people's knowledge about the various religious holidays through education and training. In Sedlacek's (1995) model of eliminating institutional prejudice, promoting awareness and knowledge about the oppressed group(s) is the first stage of institutional development. As previously noted, most campus constituents are knowledgeable about Christianity and Christian holidays because of their numerical majority in the United States (Schlosser, 2001). However, people on campus need to know more about other religions in order to respect other traditions. Several training methods were suggested, including: (1) educating department heads about the issues related to religious holidays and how to address it with their faculty and staff, so that they can communicate this information effectively, (2) creating an ongoing newsletter (or some other means) to educate faculty, staff, and students about all of the various religious holidays, and (3) providing a course (or courses) on religious holidays. For example, a course on racism (which could include religious discrimination) taught by student affairs professionals has been described previously (Roper & Sedlacek, 1988). Ultimately, it is hoped that implementation of this recommendation would lead to faculty and staff being interested in the various religious holidays, as well as encouraging students to observe religious holidays in their chosen faith (e.g., students would not be afraid to approach professors).

Collaborate with the established diversity programs. Many colleges and universities already have established diversity programs. Therefore, it was recommended to utilize some of the existing resources by expanding the notions of diversity and multiculturalism to include religious issues. For example, one idea discussed was to create and perpetuate interfaith dialogues among campus faculty, staff, and students (e.g., to discuss religious holiday issues, living/working in a multi-faith environment, interfaith activities). Another suggestion was to

either (a) infuse religious issues into existing diversity classes, and/or (b) offer courses related to religious diversity (with some specific focus on holidays). Furthermore, it was recommended that these diversity courses be made a part of the core requirements for all students.

During our presentation, a concern was raised about the limited funds and staffing within diversity program offices. Therefore, an alternative solution was offered. It was thought that the institution could hire a coordinator of campus multi-faith activities. This person could serve as a coordinator for religious persons (e.g., chaplains) and liaison to religious groups (e.g., student religious groups) on campus. In addition, she or he would ensure the equality of all religious persuasions (e.g., students could report problems/discrimination related to religious issues). Having one or more full-time personnel working specifically on religious issues should help facilitate the implementation of activities related to religious holidays and ensure that these issues are consistently considered on campus. Connections between student affairs professionals and campus-based religious organizations have been suggested previously (Temkin & Evans, 1998).

Space/Resource Equality. The physical space (e.g., a place to worship) and resources (e.g., chaplain) allotted to each religious group is likely to communicate a subtle, yet important message from the campus administration about the perceived importance of those groups. For example, Christian students are the only group with a physical space (i.e., a chapel) to worship at our home institution. Thus, it is recommended that all religious groups receive equal treatment with regard to space and resources. A related concern raised was that of religious holiday decorations. It appears that the Christmas colors (i.e., red and green) are the ones that get promoted in offices. In order to make all campus members feel welcomed and valued, it is recommended that all holidays be recognized, or, if that is not possible, none at all.

Modify existing policies. Changing the actual policies, while difficult to implement, was also recommended nonetheless. First, it was thought that students should not need permission to observe religious holidays. Rather, students should be empowered to feel comfortable asserting their non-attendance on religious holidays, and the policies should reflect this. In addition, the policy makers are encouraged to contact the religious communities on their campus to make policies with their concerns in mind. This way, policies about religious holiday observance would consider the needs and wishes of the religious communities.

Finally, changes to the final exam policy and schedule were suggested. Specifically, within the current schedule, exams are given on Fridays and Saturdays, but not Sundays. This decision appears to be biased toward Christian students (i.e., since Sunday is the Christian holy day). Therefore, it was recommended that final exams be administered only during weekdays and never on a religious holiday. However, given the large number of religious holidays, it was thought that a 'back-up plan' should be developed in case scheduling conflicts necessitated the administration of an exam on a religious holiday. Therefore, the policy should also allow for alternative personnel to proctor examinations when necessary.

Other ideas. Some other suggestions emerged from our discussion at the conference presentation (Schlosser et al., 2001). One recommendation is that campus dining halls consider religious holidays when deciding upon hours of operation. For example, during the month long celebration of Ramadan, Muslim students can not eat between sunrise and sunset. Other religious groups may be bound by specific dietary restrictions that should also be considered by campus dining services. Another idea was to modify the academic calendar so that it allows students to observe religious holidays without dealing with academic issues concurrently (e.g., 3 terms of 10 weeks on, followed by 3 weeks off).

Conclusion

We recognize that discussing emergent issues like religion often raises as many questions, if not more, than we are attempting to address. Several issues were raised that should be addressed in future work. For example, what do we do as student affairs professionals with students who don't belong to a particular faith? And how does a non-traditional religious group (e.g., Wiccan students) get formally recognized on campus? These are just a few of the concerns that will need to be addressed as campuses more consistently recognize their multi-faith nature.

The issue of religious holidays goes beyond just considering the students. Results of our presentation revealed that the religious group affiliation of faculty and staff is going to play a significant role in policies concerning religious holiday observance. This is because the religious identity of the faculty and staff will affect how they respond to the policies concerning religious holiday observance, as well as the changes being suggested. For example, if faculty and/or staff held anti-religious attitudes, then students are likely to perceive greater difficulty dealing with issues around religious holiday observances with these persons. Therefore, policies concerning religious holiday observance must consider all members of the campus community.

References

Gelb, S.A. (1987). Christmas Programming in Schools: Unintended Consequences. Childhood Education, 64, 9-13.

Ribak-Rosenthal, N. & Kane, C.M. (1999). Minority Religious Practices: The need for Awareness and Knowledge. Counseling and Values, 43, 142-152.

Roper, L.D. & Sedlacek, W.E. (1988). Student affairs professionals in academic roles: A course on racism. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal, 26 (1), 27-32.

Schlosser, L.Z. (2001). Christian privilege: Breaking a sacred taboo. Manuscript under review.

Schlosser, L.Z., Holmes, S.E., Ulmer, H., & Sedlacek, W.E. (2001). Religious holidays on campus: Moving toward a policy that truly appreciates diversity. Paper presented at the 27th Annual Maryland Student Affairs Conference, College Park, Maryland.

Schlosser, L.Z. & Sedlacek, W.E. (1999). [Demographic data from the University New Student Census]. Unpublished raw data.

Sedlacek, W.E. (1995). Using research to reduce racism at a university. Journal of Humanistic Education and Development, 33, 131-140.

Sedlacek, W.E. (1996). An empirical method of determining nontraditional group status. Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development, 28, 200-209.

Snyder, R.B. & Sedlacek, W.E. (2001). A profile of the University of Maryland College Park Incoming Student Class 2000-2001 (Research Report #1-01). College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland, Counseling Center.

Suthakaran, V. & Sedlacek, W.E. (1999). A profile of incoming freshmen students at the University of Maryland, College Park 1998-1999 (Research Report #2-99). College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland, Counseling Center.

Temkin, L. & Evans, N.J. (1998). Religion on campus: Suggestions for cooperation between student affairs and campus-based religious organizations. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Journal, 35 (5), 61-69.